PART III: Migration, Politics, and Ethics

Realistic and Idealistic Approaches to the Ethics of Migration[1]

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There are two approaches to morality. The realistic approach wants to avoid too large a gap between the ought and the is and focuses on what it is possible given existing realities. This approach, however, inhibits us from challenging fundamentally unjust institutions and policies. The idealistic approach, in contrast, requires us to assess current reality in light of our highest ideals. Its weakness is that it may not help us answer the question of how to act in this non-ideal world. Discussions about the ethics of migration require a full range of perspectives using both approaches.

The sentence "ought implies can" is a familiar dictum in moral theory. But what does "can" mean in this context? More specifically, how should a concern for what is possible affect our reflections upon the ethics of migration? In what sense must a policy or practice or institutional arrangement affecting migration be possible before it may be regarded as obligatory? What sorts of impossibilities constrain moral demands or moral judgements about right and wrong, good and bad in this area?

This article identifies two different ways of answering these questions which I label realistic and idealistic approaches to morality. The former is especially attentive to the constraints which must be accepted if morality is to serve as an effective guide to action in the world in which we currently live. The latter is especially concerned with issues of fundamental justification and inclined to challenge what is in the name of what is right.

I use the term "approaches to morality" to indicate that what is at stake here is more a matter of differing sensibilities and strategies of inquiry than of logically incompatible positions. Formally it is possible to construct an ethical account that incorporates both realistic and idealistic concerns, and ultimately it is desirable to do so. Moreover, these two approaches are ideal types. Actual discussions of the ethics of migration often include elements of both. Yet I think these labels capture two relatively distinct tendencies in ethical discussions and that drawing attention to them can be illuminating.

[1]This article is a much revised version of a paper originally delivered at the 1987 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association. I wish to thank audiences in Chicago, Louvain-la-Neuve, and Toronto as well as the original audience and several of my graduate seminars for responses to earlier versions.

Each approach has something important to contribute to our understanding of the ethics of migration. Yet I think that each approach typically brings one set of concerns into focus and simultaneously screens another from view. In asking one set of questions, we tend to set aside another; in advancing one set of considerations, we tend to neglect another. I hope that by presenting these two ideal types of different approaches to morality, I present a picture of how we discuss the ethics of migration that seems familiar and accurate to the reader, and that by becoming self-conscious about the different tendencies that flow from these two patterns of thinking, we will find it easier to construct a more comprehensive ethical view.

I spend more time discussing the realistic approach because it is the one that is less developed theoretically.[2] Indeed, I suspect that many academic philosophers would regard the term "realistic morality" as an oxymoron. Yet I think that what I call the realistic approach informs most actual discussions of public policy, not only by officials but also by activists struggling to change current policies. I regard it as a morally serious approach worthy of more attention than it has received in academic discussions of the ethics of public policy. The idealistic approach is both more familiar and more congenial to academic philosophers and political theorists (like me). While I think that the realistic approach has certain characteristic dangers and weaknesses, I think that it also has certain characteristic strengths that reveal the limitations and weaknesses of the idealistic approach.

I begin then with the realistic approach to morality. Stanley Hoffman (1981:28) nicely captures the fundamental impulse behind this approach:

> One of the key necessities in this field is to avoid too big a gap between what is and what ought to be. In any system of law, or in any system of morals, there is always a gap between the *is* and the *ought*, between the empirical pattern and the norm. The gap is necessary and inevitable. If there were no gap, people would not feel any sense of obligation, or any remorse when they violate a norm. But when the gap becomes too big, the system of law or the system of morals is really doomed – to have no impact whatsoever or to be destroyed.

The emphasis on avoiding too large a gap is what I regard as the essential realism of this sort of approach. This does not mean that people (or states) will never act wrongly, but that it should not be unreasonable to expect people to conform to moral requirements and most of the time most of them will do so for the most part.

How might a concern to avoid too large a gap between the "ought" and the "is" affect an inquiry into the ethics of migration? In general terms, it would suggest that whatever we say ought to be done about international migration should not be too far from what we think actually might happen. And whatever we say we ought to do should not be too far from what we think our community

[2]Of course, there are exceptions. Aristotle, Machiavelli, and Rousseau all explore, in different ways, aspects of what I am calling here a realistic approach to morality. Max Weber's discussion of the "ethics of responsibility" (1946) and Michael Walzer's discussion of "the problem of dirty hands" (1973) are two more recent attempts to address related issues. I will not attempt here to connect my own reflections to these other discussions.

might do. Let me identify three kinds of realities (*i.e.*, three aspects of the "is") that might be regarded as constraining an inquiry into the ethics of migration that aims to guide practice: institutional, behavioral and political.[3]

Perhaps the prime example of an institutional reality that many people think should be taken as a parameter for moral discussions about migration is the modern state. From a realistic perspective, whatever we might want to say about migration should accept as a starting point the division of the world into states that are, at least formally, sovereign and independent. This means that we should start with a recognition that every state has the authority to admit or exclude aliens as it chooses since that authority is widely acknowledged to be one of the essential elements of sovereignty. This realism about the entrenched character of the state as an institution need not preclude moral criticism of a state's policies on migration (whether by citizens or by outsiders), but it does reject in advance proposals for world government or other radically new external constraints on a state's power to set its own migration policies. It does so consciously, on the grounds that these sorts of proposals have no chance of being implemented or even of being given serious consideration. An ethics of migration that requires abolition or even radical transformation of the state system is not a morality that can help us to determine what is to be done in practice.

Consider now the way behavioral realities might constrain morality in this sort of approach. If you want to avoid too large a gap between the ought and the is, then you cannot use moral standards that no one ever meets or even approximates in their actual behavior. If everybody is violating a moral standard, then from a realistic perspective it is questionable whether that standard can be properly described as a moral norm or (to avoid linguistic tricks) as a moral standard that people ought to obey. If everybody is falling short of some supposed moral duty, then a realist would say that the duty is too demanding, that it violates the principle that ought implies can. From a realistic perspective, moral norms should not stray too far from what most actors are willing to do much of the time. This does not mean that morality is irrelevant, that people or states can do whatever they want and call it moral. But it does introduce a powerful behavioral and comparative element into morality. What is morally obligatory depends to an important extent on what is being done.

Take the issue of admission of refugees. In principle, it is widely accepted that refugees who have no reasonable prospect of safe return to their homeland in the foreseeable future should be offered the opportunity to resettle permanently elsewhere. In a sense, this principle is just a corollary of a system that divides the world into territorial states. Everyone should have a state where he

[3]These three "realities" and the three prerequisites of an effective morality that I discuss later are intended to illustrate what I take to be typical tendencies of thought in the realistic approach. I do not contend that every author who aspires to an ethics that would guide action would accept every one of these constraints. Moreover, I do not pretend that the three categories I use here have any deep theoretical significance. They simply provide a convenient expositional device for discussing concrete examples of the ways in which various views of what is possible can constrain moral demands.

or she can live in peace and safety. In practice, very few countries are willing to accept refugees for permanent resettlement. The United States and Canada accept many more (in relation to population) than most states. They are proud of their records in this area. From the perspective of a realistic morality, their pride is justifiable because they do more than other countries. They deserve praise and admiration for their policies. It would be pointless to ask whether they do their fair share (as measured, say, by the number they would have to take if they accepted their proportion in relation to the population of all the refugees seeking permanent resettlement or the number they would have to take if the quotas were adjusted for existing population densities). It would be even more senseless to criticize these two nations for failing to live up to some abstract standard, like admitting all refugees who want to come.

Let me emphasize a point made earlier. The realistic approach does not reject all moral criticism. Some countries (*e.g.*, Japan) admit very few refugees. It well may be appropriate to criticize them for failing to do more (even after taking account of differences in population density, traditions, and so on). Similarly, in a realistic context, one can debate the appropriateness of various standards. Some countries look relatively good under one and relatively bad under another (I'm assuming here that the United States and Canada come out relatively well under any reasonable comparative standards). But it would not be reasonable to adopt moral standards that everyone fails to meet by a considerable margin. A moral approach that ignores behavioral realities is doomed to irrelevance.

Let me turn finally to the way political realities might shape and constrain an inquiry into the ethics of migration. Politics is primarily about power and interests. To be sure, there are many different sorts of power, and interests are not simply given but can be constructed, interpreted and combined in many different ways. But these factors are not infinitely malleable. Part of the task of any realistic ethics of migration is to make some assessment of what policy options are politically feasible and to focus one's evaluation on those, leaving aside policies that have no chance of adoption. Of course, the question of what is feasible in a given context may be highly contestable, but a concern for political feasibility will nevertheless shape and constrain the inquiry in significant ways. For example, no one would suppose that open borders (between all states, not just those of the affluent West) is a realistic policy option, so from this perspective there would be no point in wasting time on evaluating the hypothetical moral merits of such an approach. For the most part, one would probably focus on incremental changes in existing policies: increases or decreases in overall levels of immigration, changes in the criteria of admission, changes in refugee adjudication procedures, modifications of the rules affecting employers of unauthorized immigrants, and so on.

In assessing these policy options, a realistic approach would want to consider how changes might be brought about (or prevented). In particular, it would be desirable to identify agents of social change who would be able to act effectively both because they possess the resources to bring change about and because they

have an interest in doing so. From this perspective, we should begin our moral reflections on migration by thinking about who gains and who loses from different migration policies and what resources various actors can bring to bear in a conflict over migration issues. It is only in this area, the realm of real choice in the real world, where a fairly specific range of different outcomes is possible but the precise outcome is not certain, that one can talk sensibly about good and bad.

One political reality that participants in debates over immigration policy often cite is the risk of a backlash against immigrants and refugees by current citizens. Defenders of policies that are more restrictive frequently argue that such measures are needed to prevent even harsher ones that will be demanded if citizens feel that the borders are out of control or that the arrival of so many immigrants and refugees is creating too much economic and social dislocation. Of course, the actual risk of such a backlash can only be assessed in particular contexts, but given the political developments of the past few years in Europe and North America, it does not seem reasonable to say that concern about the possibility of a backlash is never warranted. From the perspective of a realistic morality, the likelihood of a backlash is one possible consequence that should be taken into account in assessing the desirability of adopting a particular policy. There is no point in wasting time considering whether the popular reaction is racist or whether the politicians might be able to prevent such a reaction if they expended vast amounts of political capital to do so. (Thinking about realistic political strategies to prevent or contain such a backlash is another matter.) The key ethical question is what we ought to do, all things considered. What course of action should we pursue in this particular context? Thus, the risk of a backlash is just one more political reality that should shape and constrain our judgement of what to do.

Because a realistic approach is concerned, above all, with guiding action, it also encourages us to pay attention to the factors that make morality effective in the world. Let me illustrate how three such factors might play a role in a realistic approach to the ethics of migration, designating these the psychological, sociological, and epistemological prerequisites of an effective morality.

I begin with the psychological factor. What makes moral behavior possible? There must be at least some conflict between acting morally and pursuing self-interest narrowly construed or the term morality loses all its meaning. Why are people willing to act in ways that transcend immediate self-interest? One tradition, that traces its roots to Hume among others, sees the motivation for moral behavior as the outgrowth of an emotional identification with others. Once one can feel things from the other's perspective, one becomes willing to try to see them from the other's perspective as well and to adopt and follow rules of conduct that give the other's interests equal weight with one's own. This sort of emotional identification is strongest in one's immediate family and becomes weaker (but still possible) as one moves outward through friends and acquaintances to the larger society. Correspondingly, the moral demands resting on this emotional identifi-

cation must weaken as the identification weakens. The moral duties of a parent to a child can be more extensive and demanding than those of one friend to another; those of friends more extensive and demanding than those of one citizen to another; and those of fellow citizens more extensive and demanding than those of one human being to another. (The optimistic version of this view sees morality as a series of concentric spheres, bigger but thinner as one moves away from the center and without any conflict among the spheres.)

If one accepts this view of the psychological prerequisites of moral behavior and aims at a realistic morality, the crucial task is to avoid overload, *i.e.*, not to place greater moral demands on people in any given context than their degree of emotional identification with others in that context will enable them to fulfill. Of course, it is possible to recognize that the strength and range of this sort of emotional identification varies both culturally and historically and is the product of human action as well as circumstances. At one time, perhaps, most people felt little identification with others to whom they were not tied by relations of kinship or marriage. Now, in many modern states, people feel a fairly strong identification with their fellow citizens even though the citizens number in the millions and most of them are strangers to one another.[4] But this relatively strong emotional identification does not yet extend to the whole human race, will not do so for the foreseeable future, and may never. Thus it would be a mistake to expect the same sort of moral commitment to foreigners as to one's fellow citizens, folly to suppose that people would be willing to make the same sorts of sacrifices and bear the same sorts of burdens for outsiders as for those with whom they share a common political life.

What does this claim about the psychological prerequisites of morality imply for the ethics of migration? That one must expect that states will give greater weight to the interests of current members than to the interests of those seeking to join through immigration and that it is reasonable and proper for them to do so. The most that a realistic morality can hope for is that people will transcend narrower group identifications and interests to some extent and will ask "What's good for us collectively as a community?" The answer to that question may entail the admission of many new immigrants. But a realistic morality will not condemn states that decide otherwise (leaving aside the question of refugees). The emotional underpinnings of morality will not bear very heavy demands from outside the state.

One plausible sociological hypothesis about morality is that the more congruent a morality is with interests, the more likely it is that its moral prescriptions will be obeyed; the more sharply a morality conflicts with

[4]As the struggles in Bosnia and elsewhere show, the spheres of identification can contract as well as expand. Even a relatively strong and expansive sphere of identification with one's fellow citizens cannot be presumed to be a permanent achievement. Indeed one of the arguments used against the acceptance of immigrants and refugees in many countries, especially those that are not traditional countries of immigration, is that the arrival of large numbers of people who do not share a common history and culture will weaken the emotional identification of citizens with one another.

interests, the more likely it is that its moral prescriptions will be ignored or violated. As I noted above, morality cannot be reduced to self-interest narrowly conceived, but that does not mean that the connection between morality and interests is irrelevant. A realistic morality then will take interests into account as one kind of constraint on what can be expected of people.

Let me elaborate. From a sociological perspective, morality may work best when it fits with long-term or collective interests, even if it conflicts with narrow or self-interested ones. Some see reciprocity as the key to an effective morality. (*See* Buchanan, 1990, for an exposition and critique of this view.) Morality can provide a solution to collective action problems, especially in situations where enforcement (even of the decentralized, tit-for-tat variety) is not feasible. For example, we all benefit when people follow norms of neighborliness and concern for the community (Hirsch, 1978). We all gain in the long run if people are willing to stay in line, to refrain from standing on tiptoes in a crowd or from throwing their trash on the street. We gain if people are willing to support public education even when they do not have school age children themselves. This sort of behavior is moral in the sense that it cannot be derived from, and may conflict with, a careful calculation of one's individual costs and benefits in any given situation. According to the hypothesis I am considering here, people are willing to behave in this moral way because they see themselves as members of a reciprocal community. (This points again, from a different angle, to the links between identification and morality.) In a reciprocal community, if A helps B in one way today, C may help A in a different way tomorrow. The general sense of mutual benefit encourages people to take a public-spirited, long-term perspective in their behavior and in their views on public issues.[5] From this perspective, the key to an effective morality is its link to broader interests. To expect people to follow moral prescriptions that conflict strongly with both their immediate, clear short-term interests and with their more diffuse long-term ones would be unreasonable and foolish.

What does this imply for the ethics of migration? That one should not expect people to adopt migration policies that conflict with their fundamental, long-term interests. People may be willing to bear some costs in the short run, to make sacrifices and be generous, but they are most likely to do so if they feel that this will benefit them (or their children) in the long run or at least not entail significant long-run costs. It may also suggest that people are apt to think about their moral duties with regard to immigration in terms of reciprocity, especially in countries of immigration like Canada and the United States. This means, on the one hand, that they may feel obliged to continue the tradition of immigration, making access available to new people as it was to them or

[5]When the sense of long-term reciprocity breaks down, when people begin to feel that they are somehow losing from acting morally (especially if they feel that others are not acting morally and gaining advantages by doing so), then they will cease to follow moral guidelines and will pursue more narrowly defined interests. Hirsch (1978) argues that this is one of the central dynamics in modern capitalist societies.

their ancestors. But it may also mean that they only will be willing to go as far as reciprocity requires. In other words, some openness even if that has costs, but not unlimited openness regardless of the costs.

There is another way in which interests may constrain a realistic morality. There is a limit to the extent to which most people can be expected to act against their interest. No morality should expect most people to be saints or heroes (Fishkin, 1982). A morality that requires people to sacrifice what they regard as their basic interests (at least under normal circumstances) is bound to fail as a guide to action. On this view, one requirement of a realistic ethics of migration is that it not place too much strain on the state and that it not require too many sacrifices from current citizens. For example, an ethical demand that we give up half our wealth to provide for the immigrants and refugees of the world is an ethical demand that would be bound to be ignored, regardless of the force of the moral arguments supporting it.

Finally, consider the epistemological prerequisites of an effective morality. Our moral knowledge – like other forms of knowledge – is rooted in a particular social and historical context (Walzer, 1983, 1987). It is local knowledge. You cannot abstract entirely from the culture and way of life in which our sense of right and wrong, good and bad, is embedded and still make moral sense. So, we have to start with the moral understandings of those around us, of those with whom we share a common life. We stand in the cave, as Walzer says, and unlike Plato's philosopher we should not seek to transcend it, not if we wish to provide moral guidance to our contemporaries. This does not mean that we have to accept every bit of the conventional wisdom. On the contrary, moral reflection often leads to social criticism. But the critical principles are immanent in the shared moral understandings of our fellow citizens. And we cannot stray too far from accepted moral views if we aim to persuade others. Our shared understandings constitute not only a point of departure for, but also a realistic constraint upon, moral argument.

Henry Sidgwick (1907), a philosopher whose utilitarianism puts him sharply at odds with Walzer in many other important respects, expresses a similar view:

> . . . the utilitarian, in the existing state of our knowledge, cannot possibly construct a morality *de novo* either for man as he is (abstracting his morality), or for man as he ought to be and will be. He must start, speaking broadly, with the existing social order, and the existing morality as a part of that order: and in deciding the question whether any divergence from this code is to be recommended, must consider chiefly the immediate consequences of such divergence, upon a society in which such a code is conceived generally to subsist. (pp. 473–474)

Utilitarians care about consequences, including the consequences of morality. An ideal morality that has no impact on how people actually behave has no good consequences. Hence, from a utilitarian perspective, it is not a good morality. If a morality is to be effective, it must be accepted. Hence, in moral argument, we must start with the prevailing moral views and seek no more than incremental changes.

How might these epistemological considerations affect the ethics of migration? To take one important example, we can see that our practices and our principles all reflect the widely shared moral view that states are largely free to admit or exclude anyone they want. This does not mean that there are no moral issues raised by migration or no moral constraints on immigration policy. But it does mean that these moral constraints cannot call into question the fundamental freedom of a community to choose whom to admit and whom to exclude without challenging the bedrock of the conventional morality in this area. Such a challenge is bound to be unsuccessful in changing the views of most people, at least in the foreseeable future. If such arguments are addressed to policymakers or to the public, they will fall upon deaf ears. Accordingly, a realistic ethics of migration will accept this conventional view as a constraint within which it must operate.

In sum, by insisting in various ways on the need to avoid too large a gap between the is and the ought, a realistic approach to morality aims to focus moral discussion on issues that are actually up for debate in society, and thus to maximize the opportunity for reasoned moral reflection to have an impact in public life. From this perspective, it is as idle to reflect upon how we ought to act in different circumstances or in a different world as it would be to speculate about the morality of angels or aliens from another planet. We have to act responsibly and effectively in the world in which we actually live. We best can turn our intellectual energies to the task of determining what that requires by accepting the constraints of a realistic morality.

I think that there is a great deal to be said for this realistic approach to morality, and I hope the account I have just provided manages to convey that. In my experience, most people who care about ethics and are actually engaged with the policy process incorporate powerful elements of the realistic approach into their thinking, explicitly or implicitly. And the question of what we ought to do, all things considered, is one that serious moral reflection must ultimately confront. On the other hand, there is something lacking in the realistic approach to morality, and that lack can sometimes be a great danger.

One way to see the dangers inherent in the realistic approach to morality is to imagine what such an approach would entail for someone thinking about the ethics of slavery in seventeenth or early eighteenth century America. In that context, a realistic approach to morality would perhaps have led one to articulate a morality for slaveholders, rather than calling into question the institution of slavery and demanding its abolition. Virtually every one of the arguments I mentioned for restricting claims about the ethics of migration to realistic views would have provided a comparable rationale for restricting claims about the ethics of slavery in the seventeenth or early eighteenth century.

Let me elaborate. In that earlier context, a moral realist would presumably have said something like this: If we want to avoid too large a gap between the is and the ought, we must begin our moral discussion of slavery with a

recognition of social reality. Slavery is a deeply entrenched social institution. It is here to stay, at least for the foreseeable future. Even if an abstract case could be made that the world would be better off without slavery, there is no way to use that as a guide to action for people who live in the real world. For example, one could hardly expect slaveholders to free their slaves voluntarily without compensation. That would entail too great a sacrifice of their interests, and morality cannot expect people to do that. Morality cannot expect people to be heroes. Moreover, white people see blacks as fundamentally other. Most whites do not have the same kind of emotional identification with blacks that they have with other whites, and that emotional identification is the underpinning of morality. To ask people to act on moral principles where it is absent is a vain exercise. It leads to moral overload and threatens other viable parts of morality. From a comparative perspective, slavery is an old, traditional institution which has existed in all of the great civilizations in history. Most other societies today, at least the ones with which we compare ourselves, tolerate slavery. And within our own society, almost everyone accepts the moral legitimacy of slavery. For example, almost everyone would agree that one has a moral duty to turn in a runaway slave. Finally, if reformers push too hard – for example, by demanding the total abolition of slavery – they are likely to provoke a backlash which will not lead to abolition but to harsher treatment of slaves.

If people concerned with morality really want to have an impact, they should stick to prescriptions that people might be able and willing to follow. They should demand better treatment of slaves rather than the abolition of slavery. For example, they should focus on the need to provide decent living conditions, to avoid excessively harsh physical punishments, to keep families together whenever possible, to reward exceptional slaves with freedom, and so on. These sorts of concerns are widely accepted as legitimate and relevant, even by slaveholders. Moreover, the reformers should show wherever possible that better treatment is also in the interests of the slaveholders, making the slaves happier and more productive. Thus, morality and interests would work together (which is the only way morality can work in the long run).

I assume that the modern reader will find these proposals for a morally realistic approach to slavery distasteful at the very least. This is not to say that those who were concerned with improving the conditions of slaves (rather than with challenging the institution) never did any good. There may well have been circumstances in which the demand for abolition would have been counterproductive and in which modest reforms were possible and desirable. But whatever the temporary demands of strategy or tactics, any moral view of slavery was flawed and inadequate if it did not start from the recognition that slavery was fundamentally evil and unjust. Any satisfactory moral view had to have abolition as its ultimate goal, whatever the constraints of contemporary social reality. From our perspective today, it is surely the abolitionists (or some of the

abolitionists) who are the moral heroes of the struggle over slavery. Yet a realistic approach to morality would have ruled abolitionist views out of court.

I do not mean to suggest that restrictions on migration are an evil comparable to slavery. That is clearly absurd. But they may be deeply wrong or at least much more morally problematic than is commonly assumed. Or they may not be. For example, the conventional assumptions about the moral legitimacy of the state's right to exclude may be fully warranted, but that is something we cannot know without argument and reflection. More generally, we ought to know what our deepest convictions are and ought to be, even if we cannot act upon them. It is essential to distinguish between a regrettable but useful tactical concession to powerful political forces pursuing a morally objectionable path and a legitimate defense of an important and honorable value. If any discussion of the ethics of migration should recognize reality, it should also consider whether we should embrace that reality as an ideal or regard it as a limitation to be transcended as soon as possible. Only the perspective of an idealistic approach to morality can enable us to do this.

What I mean by an idealistic approach is familiar in some ways from the tradition of moral and political philosophy. The basic presupposition of this sort of approach is that our institutions and practices may not be all that they should be. We want a more critical perspective than the realistic approach allows. We do not want to build the flaws and limitations of existing arrangements into our moral inquiry. So, we try to abstract in various ways from the status quo. We try to avoid limiting presuppositions as much as possible. For example, Aristotle says that he wants to inquire into the nature of the best regime, a regime without presuppositions, under circumstances that one would pray to the gods for. John Rawls (1971) says that he wants to present an ideal theory of justice and so will inquire into the sorts of arrangements we should adopt if we could rely on everyone to act justly and if we did not have to deal with historical contingencies. In other words, in adopting this approach, we concern ourselves with questions about absolute justice or fundamental human goods.

Even this idealistic approach does not abandon the notion that ought implies can. Rather it focuses on what is possible in principle or under the best of circumstances rather than here and now. Aristotle assumes that even under circumstances that one would pray to the gods for, it would be necessary to have a slave class to provide for the material needs of the citizens of the best regime. Rawls spends a great deal of his book arguing for the psychological and sociological feasibility of institutional arrangements built upon his principles of justice, though he is careful to insist that existing attitudes, dispositions and behaviors must not be taken as exhaustive of what is possible.

How would we inquire into the ethics of migration from an idealistic perspective? First, we would begin with the ought rather than the is. We would start not with an investigation of current policies and realistic possibilities for change, given prevailing beliefs, interests, powers, and so on. Instead we might

ask something like this: In a just world, what rights would political communities have to limit migration and what rights would individuals have to travel freely across state borders and settle wherever they chose? Of course, this question assumes that the division of the world into states is compatible with a just world. We might want to question that and ask whether the world should be divided into autonomous political communities like modern states and, if so, what sorts of powers these states should have. Perhaps that is the context required to address questions about what sorts of controls over migration are fundamentally justified.

These questions reveal both the strength and the weakness of the idealistic approach. On the one hand, this approach offers a more independent and critical perspective than the one a realistic approach encourages. Even if we do not have a realistic chance of bringing about a fundamental transformation of our social arrangements (or of ourselves), we should still assess current reality in the light of our highest ideals. If we are forced to choose between the lesser of two evils, it is essential not to delude ourselves into thinking that the lesser evil is really a good. Approaching moral questions from an idealistic perspective avoids legitimating policies and practices that are morally wrong and gives the fullest scope to our critical capacities. Thus, this approach avoids the dangers of the realistic approach.

On the other hand, an idealistic approach to morality may offer little help in thinking concretely about alternative policies with respect to an issue like migration. As can be seen by the ease with which one can move from asking questions about free migration to asking questions about the division of the world into states, an idealistic approach to morality encourages one always to pursue the most fundamental questions. From an idealistic perspective, it is hard to justify any constraints on the inquiry or any presuppositions that are not tied to the human condition. That is not bad in itself, but the wide scope opened up by such an inquiry makes it harder to maintain a focus on a discrete and limited topic like the ethics of migration, and the degree of abstraction from current realities entailed in such an approach makes it difficult to see how whatever conclusions one reaches are relevant to the question of how to act in the world.

Let me elaborate. We might think of the question of what absolute justice requires with respect to migration as one component of the question of what a fundamentally just world order would look like. That seems a natural move to make. After all, it would seem odd to ask what the ideal is with regard to migration in an otherwise unchanged world. Why single out the issue of migration in that way, leaving everything else unchanged? It would seem to make more sense to ask about the ethics of migration in an ideal world. When we set the ethics of migration in this ideal context, however, it is harder both to determine what it requires and to see how it should guide us.

First, there are many considerations that would have to come into play in any fundamental exploration of what a just world order would require, all of

them highly contestable. In any such discussion, questions about migration are bound to play a subordinate role.

Second, even if one has answers to the question of what a just world order would look like, including just arrangements regarding migration, that leaves open the question of how to get there from here. It is not necessarily the case that the best way to move in the direction of the overall ideal is to try to reform some subordinate policy or practice to make it more closely approximate what it would be in an ideal world. For example, suppose that a just world would include free movement of people as one element in its arrangements. It does not necessarily follow that we should push to open borders as much as possible now. There are too many other factors and intervening variables. Even if the best arrangement is one of open borders, the second best may be one involving considerable closure so that other features of what a just world requires may be developed within a protected space. I do not mean to endorse this particular argument but merely to show that the path from an understanding of what the ethics of migration would look like in an ideal world to how we ought to act in the world today is not straight and smooth.

There is another way in which an idealistic approach to the ethics of migration seems problematic. In asking what justice requires, we may screen from view some of the most important issues in the ethics of migration. Take the problem of refugees. In a just world, however it was organized, there would presumably be no refugees since refugees, by definition, are a product of injustice. So, if we think about the ethics of migration in the context of a just world, we will simply not turn our minds to the problem of refugees.

In sum, the characteristic danger of the idealistic approach to morality is that such an approach may be irrelevant to the moral issues we face. Idealistic inquiries may be academic in the pejorative sense of that term, privileged speculations that do little to help us reflect upon the moral choices we must make or to guide us to act responsibly in the world.

One way to respond to this discussion of realistic and idealistic approaches is to suggest that we try to combine the two. That is sometimes possible and useful. For example, one might take as a presupposition of a given inquiry a world divided into sovereign states like the one we live in today and begin a discussion of the ethics of migration from that point without accepting all of the other constraints that the most realistic approach might impose. Or one could discuss what an ideal refugee regime would look like, thus presupposing the existence of a refugee problem but perhaps not accepting, for purposes of such an analysis, all of the political realities that might stand in the way of such an ideal regime.

These forms of reflection, situated somewhere between the extremes of the ideal-typical idealistic and realistic approaches that I have sketched, can make important contributions to our understanding of the ethics of migration. But they do not preclude the need for analyses that are either more realistic or more

idealistic. There is no single correct starting point for reflection, no single correct set of presuppositions about what is possible.

What we assume about what is possible and about the moral relevance of what is possible can have a tremendous effect upon the questions we ask and the conclusions we reach. The assumptions we adopt should depend in part on the purposes of our inquiry. Moral inquiry can provide a guide to action, and it can assess the fundamental legitimacy of our institutions and practices (and of alternatives to them). Both purposes are important, but there can be a deep tension between them in contexts where existing arrangements are fundamentally unjust yet deeply entrenched. That is precisely the case, in my view, in the area of migration. The best approach in such circumstances is to be as explicit as possible about one's presuppositions in a given context and about the way paying attention to the other purpose of moral inquiry might alter those presuppositions. Ultimately what is needed is a full range of reflections, each self-conscious and explicit about its own purposes and presuppositions. There is no uniquely satisfying perspective on the ethics of migration.

APPENDIX

To put some flesh on this abstract discussion of the ethics of migration, it may be helpful to situate a bit of the work in the ethics of migration along the continuum from realistic to idealistic. Again, the point is to provide illustrations for my arguments. Nothing about the merits of the work that I mention hinges on its location on this continuum. In fact, I have deliberately chosen works that I admire and from which I have learned a great deal (and there are many more works in that category that I have not included here). Chapter 2 of Walzer (1983) is the *locus classicus* of one kind of realistic discussion of the ethics of migration. Weiner (1995) provides an overview of the issues from a self-consciously realistic perspective. Bauböck (1994) is the only work with which I am familiar that systematically examines how idealistic conclusions should be modified in the light of realistic constraints. On the topic of refugees, one can find a range of treatments. Compare, for example, the discussions of the question of how to define "refugee" in the highly realistic approach of Martin (1991) and the highly idealistic approach of Shacknove (1985). Hathaway (1990) aims at a blend of realistic and idealistic approaches in his proposals regarding the refugee regime.

For the sake of full disclosure, I should perhaps situate my own work. The essay that is best known (Carens, 1987) is undoubtedly at the extreme idealistic end of the spectrum, but in other work (*e.g.*, Carens, 1989) I have adopted realistic constraints to make my analysis more relevant to practical policy concerns, and I am now trying to incorporate both perspectives as prescribed in this essay (*e.g.*, Carens, 1994).

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